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The Japan/United States Preservation Community Exchange

Community projects can be among the most challenging yet valuable undertakings of a university historic preservation program. One of the most rewarding, in my quarter-century as an educator, was the Japan/United States Historic Preservation Community Exchange of 1992-93.

The project began in March 1992 when I was introduced to Professor Masaru Maeno of Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. As founding directors of our historic preservation graduate programs, and as generalists with a wide interest in our respective cultural legacies and grass-roots experience, we also shared a pedagogical goal-in-common—to educate well-rounded professionals who could work in partnership with the people of a community. Our programs seemed ideally matched for a joint venture.

Two months later, five University of Vermont graduate students and I returned to Okayama Prefecture in Western Japan to join Maeno and his students in a week-long project in two endangered historic towns, Tamashima and Takahashi. Tamashima, despite its many historic buildings, shrines, and temples ranged along picturesque canals, had been long overshadowed by nearby Kurashiki—a restored town and much-advertised tourist destination. Takahashi was facing several threats, from being bypassed by a riverside highway to the demolition of historic machiya (traditional Japanese two-story main-street buildings) for high-rise college dormitories.

Student presentation at a public forum in a former soybean warehouse converted to a community meeting room, Tamashima, Japan, May 1992. Photo by the author.

Our plan was to have the students "read" each community's visible history from their own cultural perspective, and then record their observations in panels, containing photos, drawings, and text, depicting the town story, particularly important features, and make recommendations for conservation and revitalization. The results would be presented (with help from an interpreter) in a public forum in each town.

With cultures and language so different, we wondered "would it work? Our concerns proved groundless. As they fanned out in the streets reading the local landscape, the students discovered they had a visual language in common and that buildings and town form could speak volumes across language barriers. In their panels, designed to be understood more visually than verbally, the Japanese students proposed many creative ideas for improving structures, riverbanks and view sheds. Their American counterparts suggested adaptive uses for traditional buildings (as an alternative to new construction such as the dormitories), potential historic districts and heritage corridors, and tourism marketing strategies. Most importantly, all the students displayed a genuine interest in the towns and their people.

Helped by television coverage, the public presentations were well attended. Besides expressing interest in many of the specific recommendations, the mere fact of having acute observers, from afar, find value in their own everyday places, exerted a powerful effect on the audience. In Tamashima, for example, local merchants formed a "Machinami (historic townscape) club" to help revitalize their main street.

Next we invited Maeno and his students to work on heritage awareness exchanges in Swanton, Vermont, and Newburgh, New York in October 1993. Located in northwestern Vermont on the Canadian boarder, Swanton had a varied built environment, from a main street just holding its own, and a French Canadian church, to an Abnaki Native American cultural center, all surrounded by prosperous dairy farms. Swanton had been bypassed by an interstate highway and was becoming a bedroom community of the City of Burlington, some 30 miles south. Our local hosts hoped we could spark greater support for historic

Students from the University of Vermont and Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music working together in the United States.

preservation to help the town maintain its special identity.

As in Japan, during the final presentations the audience was especially moved by the students having seen so much of value in their community. As one long-term resident, Sandra Kilburn, exclaimed, "tonight's program brought tears to my eyes ... I have a better understanding of why Swanton means so much to me."

The final exchange was in Newburgh, New York, a Hudson River town located 60 miles north of New York City, with an astounding architectural heritage, including an A. J. Davis church. I first visited the city as a graduate student with James Marston Fitch in 1969 when its historic waterfront was being leveled by urban renewal. Twenty-four years later, Newburgh was still struggling with poverty, building deterioration, and the loss of tax base to neighboring suburbs. Our invitation came from Newburgh's mayor, Audrey Carey. The mayor was determined to heal the town's racial divide (downtown was predominately African American and the suburbs mostly white), saw Newburgh's architectural heritage as a great resource for community rejuvenation, and thought having outsiders looking at the community with new eyes could only help.

For two days the Japanese and American students were featured on television and newspapers, examining buildings and talking to residents, from homeowners to the homeless, in areas that most suburbanites had long shunned. Church suppers, school visits, and home stays also introduced the students to the people of the community so the turnout for the final presentations was very high. Again the reaffirmation of the town's worth, by outsiders with fresh eyes, seemed to exert great power over those assembled. After the presentations, people who had not spoken to each other in years chatted informally about the potential of Newburgh, and the dialog didn't end there.

During the exchange we had expressed dismay at the county government's decision to convert a historic downtown armory to a prison. "We were desperate for new jobs," Mayor Carey related to me in a recent interview. "After your visit we decided to say 'no' to the prison ... to hold out for something better. We succeeded and the armory now houses county offices. We've also started a Main Street project and the community is developing a vision for the future. The exchange was a turning point for Newburgh."

In looking back, many factors contributed to the success of the exchanges including the compatibility of faculty and students (and the fact that the former included the latter in project planning), people's natural curiosity about the impressions of foreign visitors, the high degree of commitment by local leaders, careful ground-work and expectation management (this was a beginning, not a solution to all the problems), and the willingness of local people to open their hearts, homes, and minds to the teams. The result was not just a report full of recommendations soon to be forgotten, but a dynamic educational experience where disbelief was suspended, allowing everyone involved to see their communities and themselves with new eyes now and in the future.

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